



Human Relations
[0018-7267(200006)53:6]
Volume 53(6): 747–770: 012624
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The Tavistock Institute ®
SAGE Publications
London, Thousand Oaks CA,
New Delhi

Work/family border theory: A new theory of work/family balance

Sue Campbell Clark

ABSTRACT

This article introduces work/family border theory – a new theory about work/family balance. According to the theory, people are daily border-crossers between the domains of work and family. The theory addresses how domain integration and segmentation, border creation and management, border-crosser participation, and relationships between border-crossers and others at work and home influence work/family balance. Propositions are given to guide future research.

KEYWORDS

border-crossing ■ culture ■ family ■ work

Work and family systems, though different, are interconnected. Current theories assert that emotions spill over between the two systems or that the disappointment one may experience in one system may propel individuals to pursue fulfilling activities in the other.

This article introduces work/family border theory, which argues that the primary connection between work and family systems is not emotional, but human. People are border-crossers who make daily transitions between two worlds – the world of work and the world of family. People shape these worlds, mold the borders between them, and determine the border-crosser's relationship to that world and its members. Though people shape their environments, they are, in turn, shaped by them. It is this very contradiction of determining and being determined by our work and home environments that makes work/family balance one of the most challenging concepts in the study of work and the study of families. Work/family border theory is an attempt to explain this complex interaction between border-crossers and their work and family lives, to predict when conflict will occur, and give a framework for attaining balance.

Relationships between work and family

With the growth of the industrial market economy during the past 300 years, a trend began which segmented activities associated with generating income and caring for family members. Before the advent of industry and the growth of market economies, a large amount of production was done by families primarily for their own consumption (Googins, 1991). However, the more industrialized the market economy became, the more that workplaces were created outside of the home and organizations other than families were in charge of production. As industrialization accelerated, the term 'work' became synonymous with 'employment'. While there was diversity in employment and in family situations (Coontz, 1992), in general, work and family activities after the industrial revolution were carried out in different places, at different times, with different sets of people, and with different norms for behavior and expressed emotion. Thus, today most workplaces and homes have cultures and expectations distinct from each other (Morf, 1989).

Because work and family are most often physically and temporally separate and because men traditionally assumed the role of breadwinner and women the role of homemaker, early researchers treated work and family systems as if they operated independently (for example, Parsons & Bales, 1955). However, by the 1970s, research on work and families reflected an

open-systems approach (Katz & Kahn, 1978), where researchers assumed that events at work affected events at home and the reverse. One example of an open-systems theory is 'spillover theory' (Staines, 1980), which postulated that in spite of physical and temporal boundaries between work and family, emotions and behaviors in one sphere would carry over to the other (for example, employees having a bad day at work are more likely to be in a bad mood when they return home). A theory complementary to spillover theory is 'compensation theory', which postulated that an inverse relationship exists between work and family such that people make differing investments in each in an attempt to make up for what one is missing in the other (i.e. individuals with unsatisfying family lives, will try to pursue work activities that bring satisfaction, and the reverse) (Staines, 1980). These theories and the research evidence that supported them made an important point: work and family life influence each other, and so employers, societies and individuals cannot ignore one sphere without potential peril to the other.

Changes in society which increased the numbers of individuals with significant responsibilities both at home and at work fueled the further inquiry into the interdependencies between work and home life. Brief & Nord (1990) list these changes as follows: a) an increase in divorce rates, leading to a higher number of single parents; b) growing labor force participation among women, increasing by 22 percent since 1983 (Fullerton, 1995); c) more part-time work; d) increased mobility among workers, distancing them from social support from nuclear and extended families; e) changed worker expectations indicating greater interest in the quality of life outside of work; and f) growing social value placed on fathers' involvement in the home. Thus, the interaction between individuals' work and family responsibilities became a concern of practical as well as theoretical significance.

The research prompted by spillover and compensation theories demonstrated that work and family were interdependent. Yet, beyond stating this fact, these theories were of limited usefulness because they did not adequately explain, predict and help solve problems the individuals face when balancing home and work responsibilities. For example, Champoux (1978) found that spillover and compensation can occur simultaneously within individuals, thus giving no way to predict or explain why individuals choose one reaction over the other (also see Lambert, 1990). Perhaps because of these limitations, most research on work and family has been atheoretical, or uses theory only to explain research results without driving research questions (Lambert, 1990; Zedeck, 1992). Perhaps the most serious problem with spillover and compensation theories is their limited focus. They generally address only emotional linkages (i.e. satisfaction, expressions of frustration), and give little or no acknowledgment of spatial, temporal, social and

behavioral connections between work and family. In addition, these theories treat individuals as reactive only, rather than having the ability to enact or shape their environments. Zedeck (1992) also points out that spillover and compensation theory miss the key issues in the problem of work/family balance: the relationship between employees and families and work organization members, and the way that individuals mold the parameters and scope of their activities and create personal meaning.

Research in the late 1980s and 1990s has examined additional variables that add more complexity to our understanding of how work and family affect each other. For example, the effect of individuals' supportive relationships at work and home has been studied. A recent stream of literature examining the supervisor's role in mitigating conflict has received a lot of attention (for example, Galinsky & Stein, 1990; Wells & Major, 1996). Similarly, the influence of supportive family relationships and family cohesion on work stress has been examined (Felstehausen, 1990). Another area of inquiry examines individuals' identification with their roles at home and at work (Lobel, 1991). For example, Thompson & Bunderson (1997), proposed that the meaning individuals place on their work may affect family life. Similarly, Carlson & Kacmar (1996) found that conflict between work and home can be better understood by examining the values individuals placed on the roles of employee and family member. Yet another area of inquiry has focused on factors at work and at home that allow for flexibility. For example, there is a growing body of literature on work policies that mitigate the negative effects of work on the family (see Greenhaus, 1988; Kline & Cowan, 1988).

Although these additional variables have added needed complexity to our understanding of the interaction between work and family, none have created a comprehensive theory that explains the processes by which conflict and balance occur. A new theory that encompasses the human interaction, individual meaning creation, and complexity of work and home situations is needed. The theory must be descriptive of why conflict and balance occurs, predictive of situations and individual characteristics that may lead to conflict or balance, and provide a framework individuals and organizations can use to promote balance between work and family responsibilities.

Work/family border theory

Work/family border theory is a new theory designed to remedy the criticisms and gaps of previous theories on work and family. It is a theory that explains how individuals manage and negotiate the work and family spheres and the borders between them in order to attain balance. Central to this theory is the idea that 'work' and 'family' constitute different domains or spheres which

influence each other. Because of the division created between workplaces and homes after the Industrial Revolution, work and home generally differ in purpose and in culture. Given their contrasting purposes and cultures, work and home can be likened to two different countries where there are differences in language or word use, differences in what constitutes acceptable behavior, and differences in how to accomplish tasks. For some individuals, the transition is slight, for example, between two adjacent countries that share the same language, currency, and customs. For others, the contrast between work and family is much greater, thus requiring a more extreme transition. People are border-crossers who make daily transitions between these two settings, often tailoring their focus, their goals, and their interpersonal style to fit the unique demands of each. Though many aspects of work and home are difficult to alter, individuals can shape to some degree the nature of the work and home domains, and the borders and bridges between them, in order to create a desired balance. I define 'balance' as satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home, with a minimum of role conflict.

The development of border theory

After reading existing literature on work and family conflict and finding it unsatisfactory, I decided to develop a new theory. Under the advice of a mentor with expertise in qualitative methodology, I curtailed all reading and hypothesizing and began to explore the phenomenon on my own to gain a fresh perspective. Initially, I kept a journal of my own experience balancing my academic work, my relationship with my spouse (also an academic) and my three young children. Then, with the help of several research assistants, I conducted interviews with individuals who had demanding work and family responsibilities. In addition, I created a focus group that met to discuss frustrations and successes with balancing work and family. At this point, I began to see that people were largely *proactive* or *enactive* – they moved back and forth between their work and family lives, shaping each as they went by negotiating and communicating. We were not *reactive*, as most of the literature on work/family conflict assumed. With this new perspective, I returned to the literature, this time looking more broadly, and I combined what I learned there with the stories and experiences I had gathered during my time of personal inquiry.

Literature

I examined literature on work and families from a variety of different fields – psychology, communication, education, business, family science, philosophy, women's studies, and history. I chose these diverse sources to better capture the complexity of work and family, and to remedy the criticism that

research on work and family has been too discipline specific (Zedeck, 1992).

Kurt Lewin's idea of 'life space' – a psychological environment that each individual lives within – provided the philosophical basis of the theory. According to Lewin (Rychlak, 1981), everything that may influence our behavior is encompassed in this life space, in which individuals organize, interpret and, in other words, enact their experience. Each person's life space is patterned in a different way. Lewin believed that there are different regions that are differentiated by borders that vary in their permeability. Some regions are in contact with other regions, while isolated from others. For example, someone who is actively religious one day a week, and then engages in unethical business practices the rest of the week would be a person with no communication between the 'religion' and 'work' regions of their life space. Thus, from Lewin, I borrowed the notion of separate psychological domains for 'work' and 'family', as well as the idea that there is a degree of interaction between the two domains which depends on the strength of the border between them.

Other social scientists have taken Lewin's idea of borders and domains further and have added the idea of border-crossing. While 'border-crossing' has become a popular term used in a variety of different research, only a handful of scholars have systematically used the concept of borders as a framework to describe how two different areas in one's experience meet, and how individuals make transitions between these areas. For example, Anzaldua (1987) speaks from her experience as a mestiza and describes the psychological borders between Mexico and the United States for crossers like herself. Lave & Wegner (1991) also use the concept of borders to describe how apprentices become 'central participants' in a field of expertise. Finally, Hall & Richter (1988) have also used the concept of borders to study work and family life. They and others describe the qualities of the borders between work and family, and how individuals cross these borders.

Stories

I also collected stories in order to understand the cultural meaning attached to 'work' and 'family', and the interaction between them. According to Bruner (1990: 137), stories are manifestations of 'culturally-shaped notions in terms of which people organize their views of themselves, of others, and of the world in which they live'. Bruner (1990) also says that stories convey our ideas about causality and determinacy – ideas with which we create our institutions and change them.

The stories and experiences were collected from published sources

(McKenna, 1997; Nippert-Eng, 1996; Terkel, 1974) and through in-depth interviews with 15 individuals who had full-time employment and 'significant family responsibilities'. These individuals were contacts of the author and two research assistants, and were selected because their particular work and family situations made balance challenging. For example, one interviewee had recently had a hospitalized son and had lost his job during this crisis; another was a single parent to three teenage sons. Interviewees were also chosen to be diverse in terms of age, family situation (married/single, number and ages of dependents), work situation (office at home, demands of job, flexibility of work), ethnicity, gender and income. In these interviews, two main types of stories were collected: first, stories of how individuals attempted to balance their lives when there was extreme conflict between work and family, and second, stories of how they attempted to keep balance between work and family amidst every-day challenges. I will share some of these stories throughout this article to illustrate the concepts and dynamics of work/family balance.

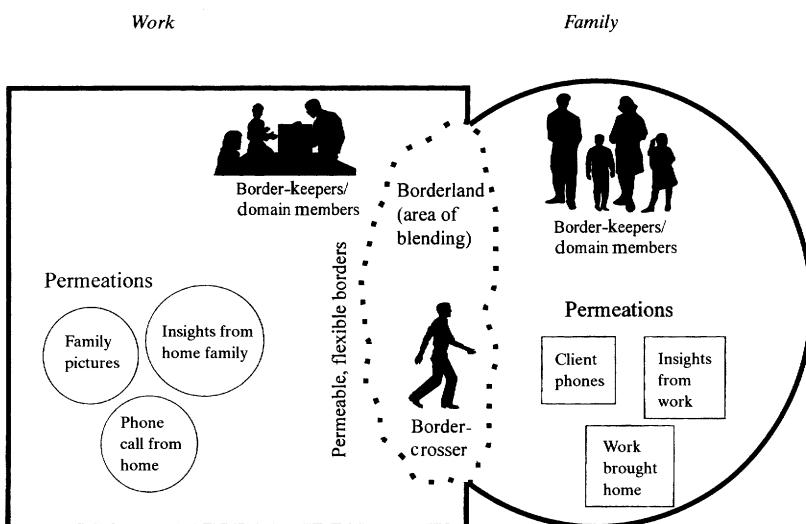
Central concepts of border theory

Figure 1 shows a pictorial representation of border theory and lists the central concepts of the theory and their characteristics: a) the work and home domains; b) the borders between work and home; c) the border-crosser; and d) the border-keepers and other important domain members.

Domains

'Work' and 'home' can be called two different domains – worlds that people have associated with different rules, thought patterns and behavior. Work and home became separate domains following the Industrial Revolution, and developed contrasting cultures and purposes because work and family responsibilities were now carried out in two different times and places.

Differences between work and home can be classified in two different ways: differences in valued ends and differences in valued means (Rokeach, 1973). In one study, individuals reported that work primarily satisfied the ends of providing an income and giving a sense of accomplishment, while home life satisfied the ends of attaining close relationships and personal happiness (Clark & Farmer, 1998). The means of attaining goals in an organization create a culture in which certain behaviors and ways of thinking are encouraged. For example, Hochschild's (1983) work on emotional labor tells how corporations train employees to suppress some emotions and create the facade of other emotions in order to create a customer-oriented atmosphere.

**Domains**

extent of segmentation and integration
overlap of valued means and ends
overlap of cultures

Borders

border strength
permeability
flexibility
blending

Border-crossers

peripheral vs. central domain membership
identification
influence

Border-keepers & other domain members

other-domain awareness
commitment to border-crossers

Figure 1 Work/family border theory: a pictorial representation and list of central concepts and their characteristics

In these organizations, being cheerful and friendly at all times would be valued ways to accomplish goals. The culture in some employees' homes may contrast, for example, by placing a greater emphasis on emotional honesty. Clark & Farmer (1998) found that individuals did report differences in desired means at home and at work: 'responsible' and 'capable' were ranked the most important means to achieve desired ends at work, while being 'loving' and 'giving' were ranked the most important means at home.

Cultures in organizations like workplaces and families are a collection of means and rules about which means take priority. Cultures are not always obvious to participants, and yet they can be powerful forces in creating

expectations and shaping behavior. Cultures at work and cultures at home frequently contrast. In a study of 150 individuals with work and family responsibilities, study participants reported that their workplace cultures, on average, were more formal, allowed for less self-determination, were less collective, less intimate, were more hierarchical, had a greater doing-orientation (as opposed to being-orientation), and were more likely to have money as the basis of the relationship than did their home/family cultures (Clark & Farmer, 1998).

Though cultures, means and ends in work and home domains most often differ, individuals often manage to integrate their two worlds to some degree. Nippert-Eng (1996) describes the way people deal with differences between these domains on a continuum, with 'integration' on one end and 'segmentation' on the other. A person who has fully integrated family and work makes no distinction about what belongs to home and what belongs to work: the people, thoughts, intellectual and emotional approaches are the same, no matter whether the task has to do with work or with home. In contrast, segmentation involves very different intellectual and emotional approaches, as illustrated in the following interview excerpt:

There is the 'private' me which is much more sensual. It's traveling, cooking, listening to music, reading. It's experiences, how things feel. The work person is frantic. Absorption, complete immersion in one thing and being obsessed with it and thinking about it every minute and thinking about everything that could go wrong, anticipating everything . . . so I can't integrate my lives. That would be ideal, but what I do is go into the happiness side for a while and then the obsessive side for a while.

(McKenna, 1997: 56)

Though integration has intuitive appeal as the most 'balanced' approach to work and home lives, in actuality there is no one desirable state of integration or segmentation. Happy, productive individuals, as well as people who describe their lives as less than ideal, can be found on all ranges of this spectrum. In fact, many people who segment work and home have created a synergy between them exactly because they are separate and different. Under this model of balance, each domain provides for essential but different needs. For example, the need to achieve might be satisfied at work; the need to love satisfied at home. A mixture of distinctly different activities gives variety and excitement, and regular breaks that one domain provides from the other allow individuals to renew their energy.

How do individuals segment or integrate work and home? And what

determines whether a person's degree of separation or integration leads to balance? These are questions that can be answered by examining the borders between the domains, and how individuals shape and manage them.

Borders

Borders are lines of demarcation between domains, defining the point at which domain-relevant behavior begins or ends. In the literature, these borders have taken three main forms: physical, temporal and psychological. A physical border, such as the walls of a workplace or the walls of a home, define *where* domain-relevant behavior takes place. Temporal borders, such as set work hours, divide *when* work is done from when family responsibilities can be taken care of. Psychological borders are rules created by individuals that dictate when thinking patterns, behavior patterns and emotions are appropriate for one domain but not the other. According to Lewin, psychological borders are largely self-created (Rychlak, 1981). Yet, physical and temporal borders may be used by individuals to determine the rules that make up psychological borders. A more exact term describing how psychological borders are created is 'enactment' (Weick, 1979) – a process in which individuals take elements given in their environments and organize them in a way that makes sense.

Permeability Borders are characterized in part by their permeability. 'Permeability' is the degree to which elements from other domains may enter (Beach, 1989; Hall & Richter, 1988; Piotrkowski, 1978). For example, an individual may have an office at home whose physical doors and walls create a sort of border around his or her work. However, the border may be very permeable because family members are accustomed to entering frequently and talking with the individual doing work. Frequently, physical and temporal permeations are perceived as interruptions. They can also be positively perceived as reminders that one is a member of another important domain.

Permeations can also be psychological. Spillover of negative emotions and attitudes from a work to home life is the most commonly documented example of psychological permeations (Evans & Bartolome, 1980). However, not all psychological permeations are negative. When ideas and insights used in one situation can be transferred to another, they can be the seeds of creativity (Whetten & Cameron, 1998). For example, in Goldratt's *The goal* (1986), a plant manager thinks about work flow problems while hiking with his son's scouting troop. The plant manager experiments with different techniques to get the group of hikers to stay together and hike

quickly. He eventually solves the problem with the hiking scouts and then uses the same principles at the plant to reduce down time and speed up production time. *The goal* is a work of fiction, but the point that ideas shared between domains can help solve problems is real. The individuals I interviewed reported similar stories. One nurse learned teamwork skills on her job, and adopted these techniques at home to increase her family's ability to work together. Another individual deliberately tried to be more courteous and happy about others' success at work (behaviors she had encouraged in her home to combat inter-sibling rivalry) to increase harmony in her highly competitive work group.

Flexibility Another essential border quality is 'flexibility', or the extent to which a border may contract or expand, depending on the demands of one domain or the other (Hall & Richter, 1988). For example, if individuals are free to work any hours they choose, the temporal border separating work and family is very flexible. If individuals may work in any location they choose, the physical border is very flexible. Similarly, when the psychological border is flexible, then an individual can think about work when at home and home when at work. Ideas, insights, and emotions flow between domains more easily when the psychological border is flexible.

Blending When a great deal of permeability and flexibility occurs around the border, 'blending' occurs. The area around the presupposed border is no longer exclusive of one domain or the other, but blends both work and family, creating a borderland which cannot be exclusively called either domain. An example of blending comes from one contact for this research who worked at home selling insurance. He also had two sons in elementary school, one severely disabled preschooler and an infant. Though his wife was at home full-time, morning routines required both of their efforts. Blending typically occurred each morning as he began his work taking calls from clients while holding or feeding a child. Blending also occurs in family-run businesses since family interactions are frequently also work interactions. Psychological blending can occur when a person uses their personal or family experience in their work or uses their work experience to enrich their home life.

As Anzaldua (1987) points out in her work on mestizas, borderlands can be dangerous when domains are very different. Under these circumstances, borderlands are places where border-crossers awkwardly juggle conflicting demands and conflict arises, they are places where individuals easily slip into a sort of schizophrenia about their identity and purpose. But, when domains are similar, some blending can lead to integration and a sense of wholeness.

Border strength Permeability, flexibility and blending combine to determine the strength of the border. Borders that are very impermeable, inflexible and do not allow blending are 'strong'. Conversely, borders that allow permeations, are flexible and facilitate blending are 'weak'. Popular literature frequently lauds the weak border as the one that is most functional for individuals. However, as 'responsive workplaces' add more flexibility, many employees continue to express frustration. In some instances, companies are less likely to take employees' careers seriously and offer opportunities for advancement after employees choose flexible work options. Many employees are surprised when they learn that employers who offer flexible work options are not necessarily interested in their family's well-being (Flynn, 1995). In addition, some have argued that when boundaries between work and home are less clear, employees have a more difficult time negotiating with family and employers about when and where work and home responsibilities are carried out (Hall & Richter, 1988). While employer responses to these frustrations have usually resulted in minor modifications to existing policies, examination of the underlying attitudes and culture of companies that derail or undermine individuals who take advantage of flexible work policies are generally ignored (Galinsky & Stein, 1990). Therefore, the ideal degree of border strength depends on the differences of the domains as expressed in the following corollary propositions:

Proposition 1a: When domains are similar, weak borders will facilitate work/family balance.

Proposition 1b: When domains are different, strong borders will facilitate work/family balance.

Borders can be differentially strong depending on the ability of the border to prohibit the flow of permeations from one direction but not the other, or the ability of the border to bend one direction but not the other. For example, individuals' work situations may require them to be flexible about their home life so that they can work additional hours, but not allow them the same flexibility when the need arises at home. Conversely, individuals might not have flexibility in when they can pick up their child from daycare, but might be relatively free to arrive and depart from work as needed. In general, borders will be stronger in the direction of the more powerful domain, and weaker in the direction of the less powerful domain. While this may seem functional as far as domain interests go, domain interests may not be the same as the individual's interests. Under these conditions, balance will be more difficult as expressed in the following proposition:

Proposition 2: When the border is strong to protect one domain but is weak for the other domain, individuals will have:

- a) greater work/family balance when they primarily identify with the strongly bordered domain; and
- b) lesser work/family balance when they primarily identify with the weakly bordered domain.

Border-crossers

Because domains and borders are partially a product of self-creation (Rychlak, 1981), it is essential to describe the attributes of those individuals who are making frequent transitions between work and family domains: border-crossers. Attributes of border-crossers which are most relevant are those which contribute to their ability to alter the domains and borders to fit their needs.

Border-crossers can be described on the degree to which they are peripheral or central participants in either domain (Lave & Wegner, 1991). Lave & Wegner (1991) define a central participant as having: a) internalized the domain's culture, including learning the language and internalizing the domain's values; b) demonstrated competence in one's responsibilities; c) connected with others who have central membership; and d) identified personally with domain responsibilities. Elements of peripheral participation necessarily contrast: a) ignorance of or disdain for domain values and cultural norms; b) full competence not yet achieved; c) lack of interaction with members of the domain's central community; and d) little or no sense of identification with domain responsibilities. Lave & Wegner's four aspects of being a central participant can be reduced to two main elements that mesh with other research on individual adjustment to work and home – influence and identity.

Influence Central participants have influence because of their competence, their affiliation with central members of the domain and their internalization of the domain's culture and values. The influence that comes with being a central participant gives crossers the power to negotiate and make changes to the domain and its borders. Research has shown that individuals who are in jobs where they have autonomy and ability to make choices (some of the important characteristics of central participants) have been shown to be more satisfied and better adjusted at work *and* at home (Repetti, 1987). If being a central participant gives a person more choices, then balance between work and home is more easily attained.

Identification Identification with domain responsibilities is a second dimension of central participation. When individuals internalize domain

values and when their identity is closely tied with their membership in the domain, their motivation to manage borders and domains increases. Previous research has found that when individuals identify highly with more than one role and try to fill both roles at once, conflict results and balance is threatened (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Hall, 1972). However, these studies measured identification by measuring involvement, thus confounding two concepts that more recent researchers believe must be treated separately (Carlson & Kacmar, 1996; Thompson & Bunderson, 1997). As these latter researchers argue, an individual may spend high amounts of time and energy within a domain without identifying with it. More exact indications of identification would be whether individuals find meaning in their responsibilities and find that their responsibilities mesh with their self-concept.

Using the latter definition, it is clear that identification and meaning creation at work and at home can add to, rather than detract from, individuals' attempts to improve balance. Examples of lack of identification with family and with work and their detrimental consequences to work/family balance are all too common. Two examples follow: in the first, an editor describes her lack of identification with her job; in the second, an individual describes his struggle to find meaning in his marriage when a life plan becomes impossible.

Example 1: 'When you ask most people who they are, they define themselves by their jobs. "I'm a doctor." "I'm a radio announcer." "I'm a carpenter." If someone asks me, I say, "I'm Nora Watson" . . . Jobs are not big enough for people. It's not just the assembly line worker whose job is too small for his spirit, you know? . . . You want [a job] to be a million things that it's not and you want to give it a million parts of yourself that nobody else wants there . . . So you absent your spirit from it.' (Terkel, 1974: 675, 677)

Example 2: 'When we married, we thought we would have children and live lives much like our parents did. But when we realized we were infertile, we had to change our dreams and goals. But, my wife and I could never come to an agreement about what that new life would be.'

When identification does not occur or is lost over time, people feel frustration. Eventually, people lose balance and frequently end their relationships with others in the domain. In the first example, the woman was attempting to find a new job so that she could leave her current post. In the second example, the marriage ended in divorce.

In contrast, when border-crossers identify with a domain, they are committed to the domain and want to shape it in a way that allows them to

contribute and excel. Balance, a consequence of artful border and domain management, is nearly unattainable by definition without identification with roles and activities associated with membership in both work and home domains.

Propositions about domain and border management and balance can be made based on this discussion of identification and influence as core concepts of central participation:

Proposition 3: Border-crossers who are central participants in a domain (i.e. who have identification and influence) will have more control over the borders of that domain than those who are peripheral participants.

Proposition 4: Border-crossers who are central participants (i.e. who have identification and influence) in both domains will have greater work/family balance than border-crossers who are not central participants in both domains.

Border-keepers and other domain members

Since work and family activities are generally carried out with others, border and domain creation and management become an intersubjective activity in which several sets of actors – border-crossers, border-keepers, and other domain members – negotiate what constitutes the domains and where the borders between them lie. Some domain members who are especially influential in defining the domain and border will be referred to as border-keepers. Common border-keepers at work are supervisors; common border-keepers at home are spouses. Other domain members may be influential in defining the domain and border, but not have power over the border-crosser.

Border-keepers and other domain members play an important role in the border-crossers' ability to manage the domains and borders. Though previous research on border-crossing (for example, Hall & Richter, 1988) has presupposed identifiable borders which people agree upon, my interview data and literature on work/family conflict suggests that this is not the case. Not only is there disagreement between individuals about the borders, including how flexible and permeable they are or should be, there is also disagreement about what constitutes each domain. In fact, disagreement on these issues was a primary source of work/family conflict. One story told to me by an interviewee illustrates one such disagreement with her supervisor about what constituted 'family':

Interviewee: I'm not married and I don't have children of my own, but my family responsibilities are probably greater than most people with

traditional families. My parents are aging, my father recently had a heart attack. One of my sisters has paranoid schizophrenia and needs my help to live on her own. Another one of my sisters has three boys, all of whom have Tourette's syndrome, and I'm like a third parent to these kids. So, my family obligations take up a lot of my non-work time. . . . The first time one of my nephews was hospitalized for Tourette's syndrome in another town, I requested some time off to care for my other two nephews while my sister and her husband stayed near the hospital. I explained to my supervisor that I frequently cared for the children, and that this was a crisis in which other family members were unable to help out, but she refused to give me time off because 'the children were not my own'. Only a few days later, a co-worker came into work crying. She explained how she had run over her cat as she backed her car out of the driveway. She had dragged the dead cat to the side of the road, and left it unburied since she was already late for work. My supervisor began to cry, too, and told my co-worker to go home, bury the cat, and take as much time as she needed to pull herself together. I was furious. I was not given time off to care for children during a family crisis, while someone else was given time off to bury a dead cat.

Interviewer: Why did the supervisor do this?

Interviewee: Because the supervisor had cats, but no children.

Disagreements like this one are common. Border-keepers such as supervisors and spouses have definitions of what constitutes 'work' and 'family' based on their own limited experience, and many carefully guard the domains and the borders to such a degree that border-crossers do not have flexibility to deal with conflicting demands. However, frequent communication between border-keepers and -crossers can help both to come to an understanding. According to Merton (1957), frequent communication is one way to alleviate role conflict since unrealistic or poorly timed demands are less likely to be made by members of one domain if they are able to understand the border-crosser's other-domain responsibilities.

Other-domain awareness Several qualities of domain members tend to build understanding and are both the precursor and product of good communication. One of these is 'other-domain awareness'. A supervisor who is aware of a border-crosser's family commitments and challenges would have high family-domain awareness. In contrast, an individual employed as an FBI agent doing undercover operations would have family members with low work-domain awareness. Other-domain awareness increases greatly in

circumstances when domain members actually become co-crossers (Beach, 1989; Kanter, 1977). Such circumstances may arise in family-run businesses where work interactions are also family interactions, work decisions are family decisions, and time at work is also time with family (Marshack, 1994). To a lesser degree, other-domain awareness can be increased by open communication between the crosser and domain members such as spouses and supervisors, and by occasional co-crossing such as open houses where family members are invited to visit the workplace or when work group members join together to help a co-worker with a home fix-it project.

Commitment to the border-crosser Another key attribute of domain members is their commitment to the border-crosser. Commitment is manifested by caring about the border-crosser as a total person, not just in terms of how the border-crosser fills one's immediate needs. Commitment is manifested when domain members support the border-crossers in their other-domain responsibilities. A wide variety of research has found that domain members' supportiveness increases the border-crosser's well-being. A study of 2000 women returning to work following childbirth, reported that supportive supervisors and supportive spouses were equally crucial to the women in lowering stress during this transition (Galinsky & Stein, 1990). A study of working women found that husbands' lack of support and approval for their wives' employment led to higher family conflict (Repetti, 1987). Many other researchers report that employer's support (particularly from supervisors) is one of the most powerful predictors of well-being, with high levels of support leading to less work/family conflict (for example, Galinsky & Stein, 1990; Greenhaus et al., 1987). Unfortunately, the lack of supervisory support for employees' personal lives is very common (Kossek et al., 1994), perhaps because many organizations still have the traditional notion that employers should not get involved in employees' private lives. Despite this notion, most employees actually prefer that supervisors be aware of their family situations so that their needs can be accommodated. When two-parent working families were asked what changes would improve their quality of family life while maintaining productivity, a frequent suggestion (second only to a suggestion for merit raises) was that organizations train supervisors to be more accommodating when family needs arose (Galinsky & Hughes, 1987).

The previous discussion about other-domain awareness and commitment to border-crossers leads to the following propositions:

Proposition 5: Border-crossers whose domain members have high other-domain awareness will have higher work/family balance than

border-crossers whose domain members have low other-domain awareness.

Proposition 6: Border-crossers whose domain members show high commitment to them will have higher work/family balance than border-crossers whose domain members have shown low commitment to them.

Domain differences and communication In addition to the personal attributes of border-crossers and domain members, characteristics of the domains may also inhibit or increase communication. Research on 150 individuals with varying family and work situations found that employees who reported that their work and home cultures were very different, also reported that they communicated less with their supervisors about their lives at home (Clark & Farmer, 1998). Therefore, when people are living in two very different worlds, they may find it difficult to talk with people in one world about what is going on in the other. Since communication with supervisors about family, and communication with family about work, can be an important way to mitigate work/family conflicts (Galinsky & Stein, 1990; Merton, 1957), then balance may be more difficult although essential, as expressed in the following propositions:

Proposition 7: When work and family domains are very different, border-crossers will engage in less across-the-border communication than will border-crossers with similar domains.

Proposition 8: Frequent supportive communication between border-crossers and border-keepers about other-domain activities will moderate the ill-effects of situations that would otherwise lead to imbalance.

Implications and directions for research

Work/family border theory can give a theoretical framework that is missing from most research on work/family balance. Border theory can both describe why conflict exists and provide a framework for individuals and organizations to encourage better balance between work and families. The propositions summarized in Table 1 suggest a wide variety of tools for better work/family balance, tools that can be used by organizations and individual border-crossers.

Organizational tools for balance

Border theory suggests that organizations can alter domains and borders to increase work/family balance. However, as stated in propositions 1a and

Table I Propositions

Proposition 1a: When domains are similar, weak borders will facilitate work/family balance.

Proposition 1b: When domains are different, strong borders will facilitate work/family balance.

Proposition 2: When the border is strong to protect one domain but is weak for the other domain, individuals will have:

- a) greater work/family balance when they primarily identify with the strongly bordered domain; and
- b) lesser work/family balance when they primarily identify with the weakly bordered domain.

Proposition 3: Border-crossers who are central participants in a domain (i.e. who have identification and influence) will have more control over the borders of that domain than those who are peripheral participants.

Proposition 4: Border-crossers who are central participants (i.e. who have identification and influence) in both domains will have greater work/family balance than border-crossers who are not central participants in both domains.

Proposition 5: Border-crossers whose domain members have high other-domain awareness will have higher work/family balance than border-crossers whose domain members have low other-domain awareness.

Proposition 6: Border-crossers whose domain members show high commitment to them will have higher work/family balance than border-crossers whose domain members have shown low commitment to them.

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1b, borders and domains must work in tandem for balance to occur. Many organizations have made the relatively easy changes to the borders (i.e. adding flex-time, flex-place and leave policies) but have not made the analogous changes to the domain's culture and values because they are much more difficult. According to the theory, a more flexible workplace should be more like employees' homes in terms of values and purpose. Not surprisingly, many organizations have created flexible work policies to serve their own interests, and not those of employees and families, which eventually leads to unrealized expectations and disillusionment (Regan, 1994). According to border theory, if it is not possible or desirable for an organization to change their culture, then borders should be kept strong in both

directions so that employees can maintain balance. A call to organizations to rethink their entire cultures when accommodating families has gone out from many sources (for example, Bailyn, 1997; Galinsky & Stein, 1990; Regan, 1994), but has yet to be taken seriously by all but a handful of organizations.

Border theory propositions 5, 6 and 8 suggest another tool to aid balance: the supportiveness of the relationship between border-keepers, like supervisors, and employees. Rodgers & Rodgers (1989) contend that the well-being of American families lies largely in the hands of first-line supervisors. Most supervisors have enough discretion given to them by organizations that they can encourage or discourage employees from taking advantage of leave policies. They can bend rules or interpret them in a way that accommodates individuals' family situations or they can choose to be less flexible. Because supervisors are so crucial to employees' ability to maintain balance, a few organizations have required supervisors to undergo training to learn to be supportive of employees' family situations (Galinsky & Stein, 1990), but such training is rare. However, this kind of training may become more common as resources like the Wharton Resource Guide for Integrating Work and Life (Friedman et al., 1998) become available.

A final tool for organizations who wish to increase employees' work/family balance is suggested in propositions 2, 3 and 4: specifically, central participation by employees. While identification is an individual process, and central participation must be a choice made by employees, organizations can do much to facilitate this process. According to Lave & Wegner's work (1991), employees become central participants when organizations help them internalize the domain's culture, gain expertise in their jobs, connect with those who already have central membership, and when organizations assign employees responsibilities they can personally identify with. Central participation empowers employees by giving them the tools they need to increase work/family balance on their own.

Individual tools for balance

Communication and central participation are tools that can also be used by individuals to attain better work/family balance. Border-crossers can increase domain members' other-domain awareness by regularly talking about what they do at other times, for example, sharing some of the challenges and successes at work with family members, and telling co-workers and supervisors about family events and happenings. Support is more likely to come from border-keepers who understand and are informed about other-domain happenings.

Individuals can also increase their central participation at both work and home in order to attain better balance. This means developing relationships with others, becoming experts in their responsibilities at work and at home, and making work and home more integral parts of their identity. According to propositions 4 and 5, central participation may lead to increased influence over domain goals and borders, thus allowing for better work/family balance.

Directions for research

Work/family border theory is designed to facilitate research that does not have the flaws identified in some previous work (Zedeck, 1992). Specifically, propositions can be made from the framework presented here before data are collected, thus eliminating the use of theories post-hoc. In addition, this theory can also be used both descriptively (for example, providing a framework for understanding why work/family conflict occurs) and prescriptively (for example, identifying ways to facilitate work/family balance). Finally, work/family border theory is designed to focus on variables which have proved to be the most meaningful in creating understanding and change: interpersonal relationships and meaning creation, as well as structural factors like organizational policies about time and work. Because of this focus on what really matters, empirical research using this theory can be more sound and more instrumental in bringing harmony to the two most important aspects of people's lives: work and family.

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Sue Campbell Clark is an assistant professor in the Department of Business, University of Idaho. She received her PhD in organizational behavior from the University of Illinois. Her research interests include work and family, culture, emotional intelligence and pay equity.
[E-mail: sueclark@uidaho.edu]